

Sisters' S. C. E.

PLAIN LIVING AND HIGH THINKING.

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Human life in its highest conception is soul life, to be attained only by an exercise of the purest attributes of the soul—love, hope, joy, service. We are great or small, high or low, worthy or unworthy as we partake of, and exercise, these qualities. There is no department of life, however humble, that would not be purified and exalted by an intelligent and sympathetic exposition of these ideals through daily living. Through the medium of these qualities, life becomes more valuable, hopes and aspirations born of the enthusiasm of loving service rise like the sparkling "jet of the fountain," revealing the purposes of toil and privation, and recognizing work as the "worship at the altar of immortality."

Some one has said we are the "creatures of circumstances." From force of habit the mind is most strongly influenced by present surroundings. We are so encompassed by the material present that the lofty ideals of past or future seem to have little claim upon our time or attention. The to-day of struggling effort makes us forgetful of the higher heritage of noble and ennobling thoughts and deeds which await us on the mountain heights of heroic self-command.

Several years ago I was intimately acquainted with a lady who, because of limited circumstances, was living plainly, enjoying but few opportunities for culture and mental growth. Working beyond her strength, broken in health, deprived, to a certain degree, of congenial pleasures and associations, she had unconsciously ceased to see any charm in her surroundings, or to realize that any means of improvement were still within her reach. In a dull unthinking fashion she performed her constant daily, weekly, yearly duties, living only in the dreary present, never looking into the future except with a dull sense of its being only a continued present, never guessing that she was needlessly succumbing to circumstances.

She happened finally to hear a lecture given by a gentle, pure hearted, womanly woman, the subject of which I do not know, but it seemed to contain an argument in favor of higher living among common places. In earnest, sympathetic words the speaker exhorted the weary depressed men and women to rise occasionally above "the dead level of the ordinary," and seek to embellish their lives with some fresh beauty or attraction. She showed the lack of beauty and lasting usefulness in the cramped and narrow life,

and urged her hearers to seek a broader expansion of soul by communion with something besides the counting house and work-shops, the potato patch and corn field, the dish pan and dusting-cloth. Seek inspiration from nature and nature's God; learn to love the productions of great minds and appreciate the fruits of artistic and inventive skill. What she said sank deeply into the heart of my friend and had its influence upon her life; and while she continues to have due regard for dish-pan and dusting-cloth and gives ready sympathy to her husband in his management of potato patch and corn field, she still finds plenty in her plain ordinary life to keep her mind from being wholly engrossed by these material things. One of her favorite quotations is from Bailey's "Measure of Life," "He most lives, who thinks most, feels noblest, acts the best."

This woman's experience is an example of many others. So many people take it for granted that a starved mind is the necessary accompaniment of a modest income and plain surroundings; and while it is true that the modest income does not permit many opportunities for culture and mental improvement, it must be admitted that the plain lovers may find more inspiration for high thinking than is generally supposed. A mind must be put in condition to receive inspiration by removing all undesirable qualities—greed, selfishness, envy, malice, discontent—making room for the better attributes—love, charity, gentleness, cheerfulness, helpfulness. A mind thus equipped is capable of a candid appreciation of the best mothers; a recognition of the beautiful in nature and in humanity; a glad acceptance of the lot God has seen fit to bestow, with the determination to make the best of it. It has been said that "the highest cultivation is that which brings one into closest sympathy with every form of human life. Dr. Chase of Haverford College says, "knowledge and virtue are unfailing well springs of happiness. The stores of learning in many and varied fields, the liberality of feeling united with steadfast loyalty to whatever is right and true, the soundness of judgment, the freedom both from fanaticism and its baser opposite, indifference to all great principles and noble causes, the breadth of vision, the access to enchanted worlds of imagination and art,—"the thoughts that wonder through eternity,"—these raise men to a higher order of being from that to which the stupid boor belongs to whom all culture is denied. And if to knowledge is added sincere religious faith, absolute integrity, and unswerving moral principle, the highest object in life is attained."

Man's greatest victories are won in minor struggles. There are brave and unknown warriors on the world's battle fields defending themselves in the shadows of obscurity against the invasion of such foes as would degrade, humiliate, and rob life of its sweetest treasures. There are noble triumphs over the lower nature, over harassing circumstances, over perplexing conditions, unseen, unannounced, unrecognized save by the hero who achieved them. "Life, misfortune, isolation, abandonment and poverty are the battle fields which have their heroes."

Plain or homely environment is no boundary to an aspiring mind. The mind if it so wills, creates a world of its own immeasurably superior to the sordid question of mutton stew for dinner and rag carpet for the parlor, being calmly content with the stew if a fine roast be unattainable, and satisfied with the rag carpet until a better one is possible.

Witness the untold wealth of the world in art, science and literature, which had its birth in humble homes while the men and women who produced it were compelled to struggle not alone for material place and power, but for the most ordinary necessities of life. Out of these depressing influences we have the work of Robert Burns who gave to the world "The Cotter's Saturday night," "The Epistle to Davie, etc." Pinched and bitten by poverty Goldsmith wrote "The Village Preacher" and "The Deserted Village." "The Ancient Mariner" by Coleridge; "Ode to a Skylark" by Shelly, Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn," Poe's incomparable verses, Charles Lamb's unique and delightful essays, Milton's immortal productions, all are shining examples of the achievements of the mind despite worrying care and grinding toil. We read a pathetic account of how a great author wrote one of his most charming works in nervous haste in order to secure money enough to pay his mother's funeral expenses. A certain famous inventor almost starved himself and family for years, and more than once pawned his wife's shawl to get a baking of flour, in order to go on with his experiments and enrich the world by the fire of his genius.

However, it is not intended that all shall give mental treasures to an admiring world. The few gifted ones must minister to the many to whom talents of creation are denied. And for the many there is the possibility of uplifting thought through intercourse with master minds. Who can fail to be benefited and ennobled by reading Longfellow, Bryant, Kingsley, Cooper, Holland, Dickens, Johnson and Spencer. One may sit entranced while